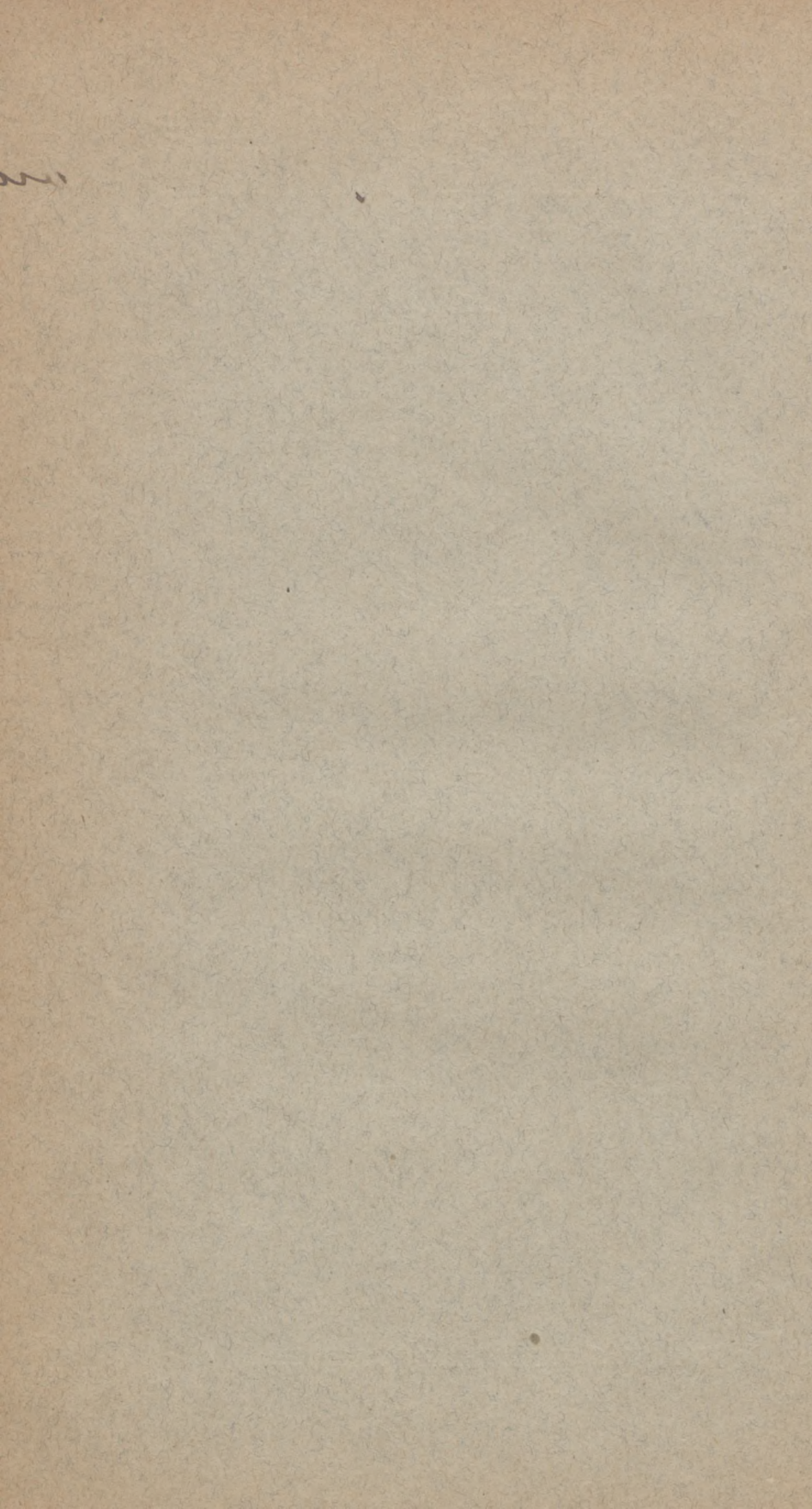


NESTORIUS AND THE
NESTORIAN MISSION
IN CHINA



Rev. W. S. PAKENHAM-WALSH, M.A.



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Chas. H. Massey
5/21/14

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SHANGHAI:

Printed at the American Presbyterian Mission Press

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1908

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THE NESTORIAN TABLET.

Chas. M. Mason
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Nestorius and the Nestorian Mission in China.

I. Nestorius.

NESTORIUS, Bishop of Constantinople (428-431 A. D.) was a Syrian by birth. He received his early education in Antioch under the guidance of John Chrysostum and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who at that time were labouring together in this flourishing school.

Among the school-fellows of Nestorius were Theodoret, afterwards bishop of Cyrus, and John, afterwards bishop of Antioch, and it speaks much for the character of the boy Nestorius that in after years, when troubles had gathered thick around him, his old school-fellows and masters were unwilling easily to believe the accusations made against him, insisting on their friend receiving at least some measure of that fair play which, no doubt, they had learned to strive for together on the playground at Antioch.

Indeed the whole struggle which afterwards gathered round the bishop of Constantinople, seems to have been in a great measure a personal one; on one side were the attached friends and companions of Nestorius, while on the other were ranked as leaders those jealous of his growing influence and the rising power of the Constantinopolitan see. It was the same rivalry between the sees of Alexandria and Constantinople which but thirty years before had led to the condemnation and banishment of Chrysostum, charged among other things with favouring the teaching of Origen, and in that unhappy age of theological controversy the slightest deviation from a generally accepted mode of expression was sufficient to involve an enemy in the far reaching consequences of a charge of heresy.

At the close of his school career, Nestorius entered a monastery near Antioch as a monk, and was afterwards ordained as presbyter in Antioch. "He was an honest man, of great eloquence, monastic piety, and with the spirit of a zealot for orthodoxy; but impetuous, vain, imprudent, and wanting in sound practical judgment"; such is the estimate of his character formed by Socrates, the ecclesiastical historian of the age, who, living at Constantinople during the episcopate of

Nestorius, must have had ample opportunity for forming a correct judgment.

Indeed those most willing to do Nestorius justice, admit that he had imbibed too much of the intolerant spirit of his age, and it is related that in his inaugural sermon on his consecration to the see of Constantinople (428 A.D.) he addressed the Emperor Theodosius II in these words:—"Give me, O Emperor, the earth purified of heretics, and I will give thee heaven for it; help me to fight the heretics, and I will help thee to fight the Persians". Having obtained from the Emperor new edicts against the Arians, Novatians, and others, he entered on a systematic persecution of these unfortunate sects, which soon raised up for him enemies within Constantinople itself, and "though humanity may drop a tear on the fate of Nestorius yet justice must observe that he suffered the persecution which he had approved and inflicted".*

The foes of Nestorius had not long to await the opportunity for attack. One of his presbyters, named Athanasius, preached a sermon in which he assailed the growing use of the term Theotokos, "Mother of God", which had been introduced into the worship of the church at Constantinople. It was a title "unknown to the apostles and unauthorised by the church", † but it had already been applied to the Virgin Mary by Origen, Athanasius, and Basil, and consequently was held in favour by the Alexandrian school. Nestorius tells us that on coming to Constantinople he found some calling the Virgin Mary Θεοτοκος (Theotokos), Mother of God, while others called her ἀνθρωποτοκος (Anthropotokos), Mother of man, and that following his former teacher Theodore he proposed the middle term Χριστοκος (Christokos), Mother of Christ. Therefore he supported Anastasius in his contention that Θεοτοκος (Theotokos) was not the best term, and it is a significant fact that, without I believe any exception, all the Reformed Communions of Christendom of the present day, acquiesce in his judgment.

Indeed the matter might have gone no further, as the middle term might possibly have been generally adopted, had it not been for the extreme tension existing between the schools of Syria and Alexandria and for the rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople. Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, nephew of his predecessor, Theophilus, who had successfully brought about the banishment of Chrysostom, is generally held to have been

* Gibbon.

† Gibbon.

an embodiment of the hard, intolerant spirit of the age, an age in which the gifted Hypathia could be put to death within a Christian church in his own diocese, and Cyril would not fail to see in the position taken by Nestorius, an opportunity for injuring the growing power and authority of the rival see.

Many modern writers, including Luther, cast the whole blame of the unfortunate controversy which now ensued, upon "the restless spirit of Cyril and his malignant disposition towards Nestorius",* and Nestorius himself, as long as he lived, denied the charges made against him, and for which he was condemned.

Into the weary war of words and anathemas between the two bishops, there is no need to enter. Cyril charged Nestorius with dividing the person of Christ, and Nestorius replied by charging Cyril with confounding the natures of Christ. Each in turn hurled anathemas at the other, and as there seemed no prospect of a peaceful settlement to a quarrel, which was now disturbing the peace of the whole church, the Emperors Theodosius II (East) and Valentinian III (West) called a general council, which was to meet at Ephesus at the season of Pentecost, 431 A.D.

The place of meeting was unfavourable to Nestorius, for Ephesus was the supposed burial place of the Virgin Mary and was the spot where, as Schaff observes, "the worship of the Virgin Mother of God had taken the place of the worship of the light and life dispensing Virgin Diana", and Memnon, bishop of Ephesus, had already taken sides against one who was held to disparage the honour due to the mother of the Saviour of the world.

And yet even at Ephesus matters might have come to happy settlement, as very many both among the ancients and the moderns think that Nestorius held the same sentiments that the Ephesine fathers did, though expressed in a different manner,† but Cyril rendered a peaceable settlement impossible, by insisting, against the expressed wish of Count Candidian, who represented the Emperor, on holding the council without waiting for the arrival of John, bishop of Antioch, and the Eastern bishops, who had been delayed by bad roads and inclement weather, but who were known to be within five days of the city; nor would Cyril await the arrival of the bishops sent by Pope Celestine to represent the Roman see, and on the

* Mosheim.

† Mosheim

imperial commissioner's protesting against such a proceeding, he was driven with outrage and insult from the assembly. Such a council Nestorius naturally and rightly refused to acknowledge or to attend, more especially as the sixty-eight bishops who defended his cause by a modest and temperate protest, had been excluded from the counsels of their brethren. With Cyril in the seat of judgment, and with all the supporters of Nestorius either absent or excluded, it was a foregone conclusion that no great difficulty would be experienced in finding him guilty, but that the whole of this momentous transaction could be crowded, as Gibbon puts it, "into the compass of a summer's day", tells more clearly than many words that the case had been already prejudged. The sentence of the council was that Nestorius should be excluded from the episcopal office and from all sacerdotal fellowship. The sentence was affixed and proclaimed in the streets of Ephesus, and the members of the council, as they issued from "the church of the mother of God", were saluted as her champions and their victory was celebrated by illuminations during the night. But their triumph was clouded over by the fact that the Emperor's commissioner declared the sentence to be invalid and by the arrival of John of Antioch with forty or fifty bishops, who at once held a second council and passed sentence deposing both Memnon, bishop of Ephesus, and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria. When these decrees reached the Emperor, he decided to carry out the decisions of both councils with regard to the depositions of the bishops, and accordingly sent a high officer to Ephesus to arrest the deposed bishops and to try to bring about a reconciliation. Cyril was accordingly imprisoned and Nestorius sent back to his cloister at Antioch, but the contest was carried on as fiercely as ever by their partisans. Nestorius, in what he calls the "blessed tranquillity" of his cloister, seems to have taken no further personal part in the dispute, but Cyril, who had been released from prison, set himself both by letters and by the unscrupulous use of money to win over adherents to his side* and to crush his opponent. At the same time hundreds of monks, persuaded that the honour of the Virgin Mary was at stake, left their desert retreats, and headed by two abbots—Dalmatius and Eutyches†—formed long processions through the streets of Constantinople carrying burning

* "Every avenue of the throne was assaulted with gold." Gibbon. "Cyril co-operated by means—always very efficacious in courts—the bribery of the ministers." Walch.

† Afterwards himself condemned for heresy.

tapers and chanting litanies to the mother of God. The Emperor was alarmed and the more readily yielded to his powerful sister, Pulcheria, who was a strong supporter of Cyril and the Alexandria school. The success of Cyril was now assured, and John of Antioch, seeing that his sympathy with Nestorius would soon involve himself in ruin, consented to sign a creed in which the term "Mother of God" was inserted; it being understood that the term was only used to express the union without confusion of the divine and human natures, and "because God the Logos was made flesh and man and united with himself the temple (i.e., humanity), even from the conception, which temple he took from the Virgin".* On the basis of this creed, Cyril and John of Antioch found themselves able to agree, and to a great extent the burning question was set at rest. For this every sincere well-wisher of the spread of the kingdom of peace must have been devoutly thankful, but that John of Antioch, in saving himself, should make no effort to save his old friend is an act that must for ever stand condemned.

The truth stated in the creed signed by John and Cyril had never been denied by Nestorius,† and would probably, if not undoubtedly, have been willingly signed by him also, but although John's old school-fellow was but a few miles from him in the monastery where they had been playmates together, he seems to have made no effort to save him, nor to have taken any pains to open the saving creed to the signature of his friend.

Nestorius was now anathematized, while Cyril regained his see, and even John joined in condemning the defeated bishop as guilty of bringing into the church "wicked and profane innovations", the triumphant party seeming to forget that the real innovation was the cult of the Virgin Mary and the title "Mother of God", an innovation which Nestorius had the foresight to see might do immense harm.

The next four years were spent by the deposed patriarch in "the blessed tranquillity" of his monastery, but in 435 A.D., his successor Maximian died, and the populace of Constantinople clamoured for the restoration of their bishop. Immediately a charge was made against him that he was intriguing with his friends in the city, and, although no proof of this was forthcoming, he was condemned in an edict which ranked him with Simon the Magician, proscribed his opinions and

* Smith's Student's Ecclesiastical History, p. 354.

† Mosheim, Mercator, Asseman, Walch and the letters of Nestorius.

followers, condemned his writings to the flames, and banished his person first to Petra in Arabia, and afterwards to Oasis, in the Libyan desert. This was done, so far as history records, without any trial and without giving the accused any opportunity of making his defence; indeed the unfortunate bishop never seems to have been, all through these years, given any opportunity either of refuting his accusers, or of stating his own position, and even granting that he held all the erroneous doctrines with which he was charged, nothing shows more clearly the decay of the Roman Empire than this, that one of her citizens could be condemned and banished without having had his accusers face to face.

The closing scene is soon told. At Petra his lonely prison was broken into by a wandering tribe of the Blemmyes or Nubians, and he was carried off. On reaching a certain river the Blemmyes discharged a number of prisoners, but kept Nestorius, either because of his greater importance, or possibly at his own entreaty. His relentless enemies found in this another occasion to accuse him of intriguing to escape, and for this he was, as Gibbon expresses it, "devoutly tortured" by the magistrates, the soldiers and the monks of Egypt.

He was now dragged to and fro through the deserts "till his aged body was broken by the hardships and accidents of these reiterated journeys". But the spirit of the bishop remained "independent and erect", and he employed part of his time in writing an account of his misfortunes in a book which he called "The Tragedy", while the president of the Thebais was awed by his pastoral letters.

How long his weak body sustained its hardships is uncertain; some say that seven years saw a close to his sufferings, and that he died about 430 A.D., but others, with Gibbon, hold that he lived in the deserts some sixteen years, and that he received an invitation to attend the synod of Chalcedon, where he would perhaps have been restored to the honours, or at least to the communion of the church, and that his death prevented his obedience to the welcome summons.

The sickness which befell him before his death was attributed by his enemies to God's displeasure, and to prove their own freedom from guilt and zeal for Christian truth, they took the precaution to desecrate his grave. He was buried in a city of Upper Egypt named Panopolis or Akmin, a place famous at one time for linen-weavers and lapidaries.

II. The Nestorian Mission in China

The death of Nestorius will be regarded by some as an ecclesiastical murder, but to his enemies it appeared an act of merit, while among his friends it was glorified as a martyrdom, and they now had the consolation of reaping the benefits, as before they had endured the adversities of persecution.

Edicts seemed powerless to crush his followers, who were generally known as Nestorians, though they spoke of themselves as Caldæan or Assyrian Christians. They spread his name and his teaching throughout the nearer East, everywhere planting churches, in which the death of Nestorius was condemned and the Ephesine decrees rejected.

The Persians in particular were averse to the action of Cyril, and maintained that it was Cyril himself who was the real heretic.

The famous school of Edessa took up the theological position of Nestorius in his opposition to the term "Mother of God", and Ibas, bishop of Edessa, was one of the strongest defenders of Nestorianism among the orientals.

The school of Edessa flourished from 431-489 A.D., when it was dissolved by the Emperor Zeno, who had invaded the East, but the dissolution of the school was only the means of sending forth Nestorian teachers into other places, and also of strengthening a new school founded by Barsumas, bishop of Nisibis, which now became the intellectual centre of the Persian church.

In 483 A.D. at the synod of Beth Lapat, the old Christian church of Persia completely broke with the Roman communion and adopted the Nestorian confession. The tension and antagonism between the two countries had no doubt much to do with the step thus taken, for it is difficult to believe that the Persian monarch was capable of balancing the niceties of the theological position.

Nestorius, no doubt, appealed to him more as a man cruelly treated and condemned by his enemy the emperor of Rome, and we may safely conclude that Nestorianism was adopted in the Persian empire, partly at least from political reasons.

Having broken with Rome, the Persian church set itself to frame its own ritual and order. The law of celibacy, so forcibly recommended to the Greeks and Latins, was set aside,

a more liberal spirit of education was introduced into the schools, houses of charity were endowed for the education of orphans and foundlings, the austerity of the cloister was relaxed, and "to this standard of natural and religious freedom, myriads of fugitives resorted from all the provinces of the Eastern empire". *

The Nestorian communion was also greatly strengthened by the religious intolerance of the Roman Emperors Justin and Justinian (518-565 A.D.). Both these emperors published constant edicts against all Christians who did not agree with the tenets then held in Rome, and also against all Jews, Samaritans and Pagans, who were forbidden to practise their religions and were excluded from all civil and military offices.

Justinian went even further, and in 529 A.D. issued an edict for the closing of the Pagan schools at Athens, allowing all non-Christians three months to choose between Roman Christianity or banishment. The inevitable result took place, and Justinian lost some of the best and most industrious of his subjects, who transported into Persia the arts, both of peace and war.

Thus the Nestorian communion gathered strength and was soon in a position to undertake missionary work among the nations of the distant East, including China, the subject of our present study.

The story of the Nestorian mission in China had been well-nigh forgotten or discredited, when in the year 1625 A.D. some Chinese workmen, engaged in digging the foundation for a house outside the walls of Si-an-fu, the capital of the province of Shensi, found buried in the earth a large monumental stone. It proved to be a dark-coloured marble tablet, ten feet high and five broad, bearing on one side an inscription in ancient Chinese and Syriac.

The discovery excited much attention among the literati of China, and the stone was visited by crowds of people, among others by some Jesuit missionaries, by whom it was translated. The emperor sent for a copy of the inscription and gave orders that the stone should be placed in a celebrated temple near Si-an-fu, where doubtless it is still preserved. †

* Gibbon.

† The stone remained standing in the grounds of the temple until the year 1907 A.D., when the Chinese government removed it into the city and placed it in the college of Ancient Monuments.

This tablet gives an account of the Nestorian mission from the year 636 A.D., when the missionaries entered China, up to the year 781 A.D., when the stone was erected, and in order to account for the wonderful reception given to the missionaries, and the success which attended their labours, it will be necessary to bear in mind the state of China at that period, and also the fact that the then King of Persia was an ally of the T'ang Dynasty, under which the Nestorians began their work.

The T'ang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) has been called the Augustan age of Chinese literature, and under its sway China was governed by some of the best and most liberal-minded rulers that the Celestial Empire has ever known.

Kao Tsu (618-627 A.D.), its first emperor, established the triennial examinations and suppressed the Buddhist monasteries and nunneries throughout the Empire, sending back to their homes and proper vocation some 100,000 bonzes and nuns.

It was Kao Tsu who established the capital of the country at Si-an-fu, in which city the Nestorian tablet was discovered just a thousand years later.

He also issued an edict giving liberty of conscience to his subjects to worship and erect altars to heaven and earth, a privilege which had hitherto been the prerogative of the ruler of the nation.

But the name of Kao Tsu is eclipsed by that of his son, the famous Emperor T'ai Tsung (627-650 A.D.), and fortunate indeed were the Christian missionaries to reach China while he was on the throne.

The Emperor T'ai Tsung and his wife, the Empress Ch'ang Sun, stand out not only among the rulers of China, but may be ranked as two of the best, wisest, and most talented sovereigns that the world has ever seen.

Under T'ai Tsung's personal supervision the Chinese army reached a high state of excellence, and it is said that he made his kingdom so safe that doors could be left open all night. But though the Emperor early showed his skill on the field of battle, he did not love war, and as soon as he had put down his enemies, he turned his attention towards the education and enlightenment of his people. As a preliminary step, he dismissed three thousand of the ladies of the palace to their homes. Then he built an immense library at the capital, in which he collected over 200,000 volumes, and not only spent much time in reading and study himself, but also insisted on all

mandarins in the capital cultivating their minds also. The library, with its reception and reading rooms, became a centre of intellectual industry, and here were frequently discussed the great problems of religion.

The Emperor himself was a strong Confucianist, and had no sympathy with either the Buddhism or Taoism, then as now so widely spread among the people. "I have observed", he said, "that those rulers who have been remarkable for their attachment to either Taoism or Buddhism, have been the cause of the destruction of their dynasties."

Once when pressed by his mandarins to ascend a sacred mountain to render thanks to heaven for the many blessings of his reign, he replied, "Shih Wang, of the Ts'in Dynasty, acted as you wish me to do, and before long his Dynasty passed away. Wen Ti, of the Han Dynasty, never did so, and he transmitted his throne to his descendants. Which of these two has posterity decided to be the superior of the other. You need not ascend a hill to worship heaven".

His abhorrence of superstition, and his desire to follow the dictates of his conscience, was strengthened by his wife, the Empress, of whom it is said that "she was a lady not only exceedingly talented, but she was also modest and refined. She had great power over her husband, who loved her dearly. She refused to meddle in state affairs, but her silent influence was immense".

One wonders what this noble woman thought of the strange new teaching which had just reached her court the year before her death, but her dying words proclaim a freedom from superstition and a confidence in God, which might be an example even to the Christian world.

To her son, who in his distress had gone with special offerings to the idols to pray for a prolongation of his mother's life, she said: "Our life is in the hands of heaven, and when it decides that we shall die, there is no mortal power that can prolong it. As for the Taoist and Buddhist faiths, they are heresies, and have been the cause of injury both to the people and the state. Your father has a great aversion to them, and therefore you must not displease him by appealing to them on my behalf". Then turning to her husband she said: "I have not been of much use whilst I lived, and therefore I don't want anyone to be made to suffer by my death. Don't make a magnificent grave for me, and then the people will not hate

me, because they have not been called to make any sacrifices in building such a one. I don't wish you to put jewels and precious stones in my coffin. All that I want is a tile to be put under my head for a pillow and my hair fastened up with some wooden pins. Associate with the good and shun the company of the evil. Don't listen to unworthy men, and neither hunt nor build magnificent palaces. If you promise me these things, then shall I die happy".

It was to a court ruled by such an enlightened Emperor and Empress that there arrived one day in the year 636 A.D., tired and travelworn with their long journey from Persia, a little band of Christian missionaries under the leadership of Olopen, "a man of high virtue". "Directed by the blue clouds, he bore the Scriptures of the true doctrine", so runs the Nestorian inscription, "he observed the rules of the winds and traversed difficult and perilous countries."

They were kindly received, these Persian strangers. "The Emperor ordered Fang-hi-wen-ling, first minister of the Empire, to go with a great train of attendants to the Western suburbs to meet the stranger and bring him to the palace. He had the Holy Scriptures translated in the imperial library. The court listened to the doctrine, meditated on it profoundly, and understood the great unity of truth."

One can imagine the conferences and discussions which must have taken place day by day in the great library of T'ai Tsung and the earnest attention the Emperor would pay to such a theme as the immortality of the soul made manifest in the resurrection of Christ, passing as he was through the waves of deepest sorrow.

We are told that on the death of the Empress he was inconsolable, and so that he might continually look at her grave in the distant hills, he had a tower built near his palace from which it could be seen.

For three years Olopen remained at the court teaching, preaching, discussing, and translating.

Among his hearers must have been both princes and nobles, for the Emperor's university had become so famous that kings of Corea and other countries sent their sons to be educated at it, and T'ai Tsung, mindful of his dying queen's last request, had kept up his practice of associating with him in his government the best men in the Empire. Thus the Christian revelation was made known first among the leaders of the nation, to

the most thoughtful and intellectual men of the day, and the fact that Christian truth appeals to the literati of China as well as to the unlettered classes, was proved by an edict promulgated in the year 639 A.D. in these terms :—

“The doctrine has no fixed name, the holy has no determinate substance; it institutes religions suitable to various countries and carries men in crowds in its track. Olopen, a man of Ta-thsin (Persia or Syria) and of a lofty virtue, bearing Scriptures and images, has come to offer them in the Supreme Court. After a minute examination of the spirit of this religion it has been found to be excellent, mysterious, and pacific. The contemplation of its radical principle gives birth to perfection and fixes the will. It is exempt from verbosity; it considers only good results. It is useful to men, and consequently ought to be published under the whole extent of the heavens. I, therefore, command the magistrates to have a Ta-thsin temple constructed in the quarter named I-ning (Justice and Mercy) of the imperial city, and twenty-one religious men shall be installed therein.”

This edict may not reveal the most perfect grasp of the Christian faith, but when we consider that it was published when England was still mainly a heathen country, and was dictated by an Emperor not himself a Christian, in a land overrun with Buddhism and Taoism, it must be admitted that it does credit to the liberality and toleration of T'ai Tsung, and that it must have issued from a sincere conviction that the Gospel as interpreted by the Nestorians would prove beneficial in China.

What then was this teaching of Christianity, which in spite of its errors was able to appeal so forcibly to such an Emperor and commend itself to the Chinese in their most enlightened era.

An outline of what was taught is engraven on the stone, and runs as follows :—

“There has always been one only true Cause, essentially the first, and without beginning, supremely intelligent and immaterial; essentially the last, and uniting all perfections. He placed the poles of the heavens and created all beings, marvelously holy; He is the source of all perfection. This admirable Being, is He not the Triune, the true Lord without beginning, Oloho? * He divided the world by a cross into four parts. After having decomposed the primordial air, he gave

* A transliteration of the Syriac Eloha=God.

birth to the two elements. Chaos was transformed, and then the sun and the moon appeared. He made the sun and the moon move to produce day and night. He elaborated and perfected the ten thousand things, but in creating the first man, he endowed him with perfect interior harmony. He enjoined him to watch over the sea of his desires. His nature was without vice and without error; his heart, pure and simple, was originally without disorderly appetites.

"But Sa-than propagated lies and stained by his malice that which had been pure and holy. He proclaimed, as a truth, the equality of greatness and upset all ideas. This is why three hundred and sixty-five sects,* lending each other a mutual support, formed a long chain, and wove, so to speak, a net of law. Some put the creature in the place of the Eternal, others denied the existence of beings and destroyed the two principles. Others instituted prayers and sacrifices to obtain good fortune; others proclaimed their own sanctity to deceive mankind.

"The minds of men laboured and were filled with anxiety; aspirations towards the supreme good were trampled down; thus perpetually floating about, they attained to nothing and all went from bad to worse.† The darkness thickened, men lost their sight, and for a long time they wandered without being able to find it again.

"Then our Triune God communicated His substance to the very venerable Mi-chi-ho (Messiah) who, veiling His true majesty, appeared in the world in the likeness of a man. The celestial spirits manifested their joy and a Virgin brought forth the holy child (or Saint) in Ta-thsin. The most splendid constellations announced this happy event; the Persians saw the splendour and ran to pay tribute. He fulfilled what was said of old by the twenty-four holy ones;‡ he organised, by his precepts, both families and kingdoms; he instituted the new religion according to the pure notion of the Trinity in unity; he regulated conscience by true faith; he signified to the world the eight commandments, and purged humanity from its pollutions, by opening the door to the three virtues; he diffused life and extinguished death; he suspended the luminous sun to destroy the dwelling of darkness§, and then the lies of demons passed away; he directed the bark of mercy towards the palace of light, and all creatures endowed with intelligence have been succoured. After having consummated this act of power, he rose at mid-day towards the Truth. Twenty-seven books have been left. He has enlarged the springs of mercy

* i.e., the number of days in the year to denote a great multitude.

† Literally, "the boiled meat turned to roast".

‡ The writers of the Old Testament.

§ Probably signifies the crucifixion, avoiding too explicit mention of death in deference to Chinese usage.

that men might be converted. The baptism by water and by the spirit is a law that purifies the soul and beautifies the exterior.

"The sign of the cross unites the four quarters of the world and restores the harmony that had been destroyed. By striking upon a piece of wood,* we make the voice of charity and mercy resound; by sacrificing † towards the East, we indicate the way of life and glory."

The simple reader may not be able to see in this inscription anything more than a curiously worded, somewhat "Chineseified" presentation of Christian truth, but under the words "Then our Triune God communicated His substance to the very venerable Mi-chi-ho who, veiling His true majesty, appeared in the world in the likeness of a man, has been detected by the vigilant, the terrible heresy for which the bishop of Constantinople was driven from the haunts of men and counted unfit to live by his fellow-Christians.

The inscription then goes on to give some account of the manner of life and worship of the Nestorian missions.

"Our ministers allow their beards to grow, to show that they are devoted to their neighbours. The tonsure that they wear at the top of their heads indicates that they have renounced worldly desires. In giving liberty to slaves, we become a link between the powerful and the weak. We do not accumulate riches, and we share with the poor that which we possess. Fasting strengthens the intellectual powers, abstinence and moderation preserve health. We worship seven times a day, and by our prayers we aid the living and the dead. On the seventh day we offer sacrifice, after having purified our hearts and received absolution for our sins.‡

"This religion, so perfect and so excellent, is difficult to name, but it enlightens darkness by its brilliant precepts. It is called the Luminous Religion."

The difficulty of giving an exact translation of a Chinese document is seen in the various translations made of this Nestorian tablet. Dr. Bridgman, whose translation may be found in Dr. Wells Williams' "Middle Kingdom", says: "Were a hundred Chinese students employed on the document

* Used in China for a church bell.

† Translated "In evangelizing the East" by some. It may mean "By turning towards the East".

‡ "Once in seven days they have divine service, in order to cleanse their hearts and to regain their purity." (Translation by Dr. Bridgman.)

they would probably each give a different view of the meaning in some parts of the inscription".*

In the year 650 A.D. the great Emperor T'ai Tsung died and was succeeded by his son Kao Tsung (650-684 A.D.). He was a feeble emperor and completely under the control of one of his wives, the unprincipled Wu Hou, but still he favoured the Christian religion, and according to the Nestorian stone, he appointed Olopen "guardian of the Empire and Lord of the great Law", expressions delightfully vague, but at least pointing to the increasing influence of the new faith. Indeed Christianity, we are told, now spread throughout the ten provinces into which China was then divided, the "temples filled a hundred cities and the families were enriched with admirable happiness."

But on the death of Kao Tsung, the dreaded Empress-Dowager Wu Hou held the reins of government. She was under the influence of a reprobate Buddhist bonze named Hwai Yi, whom she afterwards ordered to be assassinated, but under her rule the Buddhists were allowed or encouraged to persecute the Christians, and no doubt the work received a temporary check, and as the next empress poisoned her own husband and was herself afterwards murdered, one can easily believe that during this period the progress of Christianity must have been slow. However, under the rule of the celebrated Huan Tsung (713-756 A.D.) an effort was made "to restore the fallen law and reunite the broken ties", and the Emperor, although a zealous idolater, gave orders "to repair the temple of felicity and firmly raise its altar", which fact seems to tell of the damage done to the church in the capital during the preceding years. At the close of this reign, Si-an-fu, the capital, was captured by rebels, but finally the Emperor Su Tsung (756-763 A.D.) drove them out, and the inscription states that "he erected at Lingou and other towns, five in all, luminous temples (churches). "The primitive good was thus strengthened and felicity flourished."

Tai Tsung (763-780 A.D.) seems to have had a curious religious policy. He built a magnificent Buddhist monastery in the capital, and on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon prepared such an abundant feast for the spirits of the dead that

*The translation of the Abbé Huc has been mainly followed in this sketch.

since that time the seventh month has remained the great season in China for such offerings. But Tai Tsung also "at the hour of the Nativity (Christmas) burnt celestial perfumes in remembrance of the divine benefit and prepared imperial feasts to honour the luminous (Christian) multitude". The "luminous multitude", at this time, were evidently prospering, and the tablet is loud in the praises of this magnanimous ruler, who spread feasts so liberally and impartially. "Let us pray the Lord for him without blushing", runs the record. "He is always indulgent, the friend of peace and full of mercy. He is helpful to all, scattering his liberalities among the multitude. Such is the true way, such is the ladder of the holy doctrine".

His minister of State, Kouo Tso, who died in 781 A.D., the date of the erection of the tablet, receives even greater praise than his sovereign. He was indeed a great statesman, according to many the most illustrious minister of the T'ang Dynasty, and at his death the whole nation went into mourning.

Kouo Tso must have helped the cause of Christianity in China very effectively, and his generosity is thus remembered;—"He restored the ancient temples and enlarged the Palace of the Law. He raised roofs and porticoes and embellished edifices in such a manner that they were like pheasants spreading their wings to fly. He rendered perpetual service to the Luminous Gate (the Christian religion). The religious men of the Luminous Doctrine, clothed in their white robes, admired this illustrious man and wished to engrave on stone the memorial of his sublime actions".

We have now reached the year 781 A.D., in which the tablet was erected, and from that year onward, as there has not, up to the present, been discovered any consecutive historical account of the Nestorian Mission, the difficulty of tracing its course increases.

Timotheus, Patriarch of the Nestorian Communion from 777 to 820 A.D., was very earnest in the promulgation of Christianity in the East, and appointed David as Metropolitan of China, and it is the testimony of a Roman Catholic writer that "from the beginning of the sixth century the hierarchy (Nestorian) was perfectly established and the Metropolitans succeeded one another regularly".

At a synod held in 850 A.D. by the Patriarch Theodosius it was commanded that all metropolitan bishops were to repair

to the Patriarch at Bagdad once in four years, but the metropolitans of India and China were to be exempted on account of the great distance at which their sees lay, but they were to communicate with the Patriarch at least every six years.

In the year 878 A.D. a great rebellion broke out in China, and according to the testimony of an Arab traveller—Ibn-Vahab—there were many Christians in the Empire and many were put to death, together with Mussulmans, Jews, Magi and foreigners, but the disorders and persecutions did not crush the Christian church, for in 1060 A.D. we find a Chinese author writing thus in his description of the capital :—"In the street of Justice may be seen the temple of Po-sse-sse (Persia). It was built in the twelfth year of the period of Tching Kouan (638 A.D.) by order of the Emperor T'ai Tsung in favour of O Lo-sse (Olopen), a religious stranger from the kingdom of Ta-thsin".

Here then we have evidence that this Christian church had been standing in Si-ngan-fu for over four hundred years, and as the same writer speaks of two or more churches built there at a later date, we may fairly conclude that Christianity had obtained a firm footing in the capital and was widely spread throughout the Empire.

It was about this period that the countries of Europe were astonished by the renown of a Christian king in the East, named Prester or Priest John, whose riches and power were reported to be almost without limit. It is not easy to discover how much truth may be mixed up with all the romance that has gathered round his name, but all the travellers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries agree in asserting the existence of a great Christian ruler in the East during these years. Probably the name Prester John was handed down from father to son, and there was really a succession of kings bearing the title.

Letters in the name of this ruler reached the Emperor Comnenus (1118 A.D.), the king of France and the Pope at different times, which though discredited by some to-day, were sufficiently accredited at the time to induce Pope Alexander III to write to him (1177 A.D.) and address him by the title of "King of the Indies and most holy of priests".

It seems unanimously agreed that Prester John was a Nestorian Christian, and the Pope in his letter expresses himself as very anxious that he should repent of his errors and listen to

the admonitions of a certain "Master Philip", who was sent to instruct him. Indeed Nestorian Christianity was at this period widely spread throughout the East, and the kingdom of Prester John in particular must have been the centre of a radiating Christian influence. This kingdom was in all probability the land of the Kéraités, for in a letter addressed by a bishop—Ebed Jesu—in Khorassan to the Nestorian Patriarch John (1001-1012 A.D.) we are told of the conversion of the king of the Kéraités and the fact that some two hundred thousand of his subjects wished to follow the king's example. The Patriarch in reply desired the bishop to send to the king two priests and two deacons, in order to baptize and teach the rites and doctrine of the Christian faith to all anxious to learn. Such was in all probability the origin of Prester John's romantic Christian kingdom, which went on increasing in power and influence during the next two hundred years.

One of these Nestorian Prester kings, about the middle of the twelfth century, marched against Persia and Medea, took the capital Ecbatana, and was preparing a crusade to Palestine from the East, when for some unknown reason he suddenly returned to Tartary. This was the Prester John whose letters reached Pope Alexander III and whose fame resounded throughout Europe, and his influence must have greatly strengthened the Nestorian work in China and India.

The year 1203 A.D., however, saw the overthrow of this Christian kingdom, for Ung Khan, the last of the Presters John, was defeated and slain in battle and the Kéraités sank into oblivion.

These events have carried us on almost up to the days of Kublai Khan (1280-1295 A.D.), in whose splendid reign the Nestorians received the same toleration and protection as was extended by him to all religions and schools of thought, except Taoism, which he regarded as injurious to the people, giving orders that all Taoist literature should be burned.

Although the Emperor Kublai Khan held that he was "too old in idolatry" to become a Christian, still on the days of the Christian festivals he used to have the Gospels brought into his presence and would devoutly kiss them. Nor would he allow insult to be offered to the Christian faith, for when a neighbouring Christian prince named Nayan, bearing a cross on his standard, had attacked him and been repulsed, the great Emperor rebuked those who upbraided the uselessness of the

cross in battle, bade the Christians to be of good heart, and speaking in a loud voice, so that all might hear, said : " If the cross has rendered no help to Nayan, in that it hath done right well ; nor could that which is good as it is, have done otherwise, for Nayan was a disloyal and a traitorous rebel against his lord and well deserved that which has befallen him. Wherefore the cross of your God did well, in that it gave him no help against the right ".

This we are told was the end of "the flouting of the unbelievers against the Christians", but the incident shows the strong hold which Nestorian Christianity then had in the country. Indeed at this time Christianity must have been spread far more widely than we are apt to imagine, for Marco Polo, who resided in China from 1271 to 1308 A.D., although unfortunately he does not give any systematic account of the work, being chiefly occupied in observing and recording other things, yet does say enough to show us how widely extended was the church's influence. He mentions incidently a Nestorian church at Hangchow, the capital of the Empire during the Sung Dynasty (960-1127 A.D.), and in Ching-kiang-fu he says that there were, when he visited it, two Nestorian churches. These, he tells us, were built in 1278 A.D. by a baron named Mar Sarghis, a Nestorian Christian, who was sent by the great Khan as governor of the city, "and during the three years that he abode there he caused these two Christian churches to be built, and since then there they are. But before his time there was no church, neither were there any Christians".

This record of Marco Polo is important, for it teaches us that even at that late date Nestorian Christianity was not the dying and corrupt religion which one is led to gather from the descriptions of that wonderful traveller, monk Rubruk. No doubt his account is true as regards Tartary, but this Christian governor of Chingkiang presents to us a very different picture as regards China proper.

Rubruk speaks of the Nestorian clergy as ignorant, uncultured and licentious, and with a mission separated at such an immense distance from its base, with communication so difficult and books so few, we may well believe that it must have been extremely difficult to maintain the high intellectual and moral standard of the early days. Then too the incessant, constant touch with the idolatry, which Marco Polo tells us existed on all sides, must have been even more depressing and

degrading than it is to-day, yet in spite of all human failings and all these tremendous difficulties, the fact remains that Christian truth kept spreading, so that in the thirteenth century Christians were to be found in the most remote provinces, and churches in the principal cities.

Gibbon's brief compendium of Nestorian mission work in China, i.e., "after a short vicissitude of favour and persecution the foreign sect expired in ignorance and oblivion", reads, in the light of facts, rather like a pious wish than a strict reality. The most biassed historian who studies the story as we know it now, must admit the wonderful success and tenacity of the work in China from 636 up to the year 1300 A.D.

The Nestorians had now been working alone in China for almost seven hundred years, but in 1293 A.D., after several unsuccessful attempts, a Roman Catholic mission was established beside them in Peking. The leader of the mission was John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan, who having travelled through Persia and India, at length, after a journey of some four years, reached the capital just before the death of the Emperor Kublai Khan. He bore with him letters from Pope Nicholas IV, and the great Khan received him with that same friendliness and toleration which he had extended to the older mission.

Had these two missions been able to combine, and they had much in common, it is difficult to gauge what the results might not have been, but unfortunately from the very outset they worked in opposition to one another, and apparently made no effort to understand each other or to see whether some agreement or division of labour was not possible.

That which was attainable between fifty different missionary bodies in 1900 A.D., without any loss of principle, might surely have been possible in 1300 A.D., when but two Christian bodies were concerned, and those two alike not only in many fundamental beliefs, but also in many external forms.

John de Montecorvino lays the blame of the misunderstanding on the Nestorians. He writes: "The Nestorians, certain folk who profess the name of Christian but who deviate sadly from the Christian religion, have grown so powerful in these parts that they will not allow a Christian of another rite to have ever so small an oratory, or to proclaim any but the Nestorian doctrine. To these regions there never came any one of the Apostles, nor a disciple of the Apostles, and therefore the said Nestorians, directly or through others, suborned with

money, have brought upon me persecutions of the sharpest. They asserted that I was not sent by the Lord Pope, but was a great spy and a deceiver of men, and after a while they produced false witnesses, who declared that a certain envoy had been sent, bearing immense treasure for the Emperor, and that I had killed him in India and taken away what he bore. And these accusations went on for five years, so that very often was I dragged before the judgment seat with ignominy and threats of death. At last, by God's providence, through the confession of a certain person, the Emperor came to know my innocence and the malice of my adversaries, and he banished them with their wives and children''.

The man who can so naïvely write later on in his letter that he has bought one hundred and fifty boys and with them formed a choir, is not one to be readily suspected of want of sincerity, and it is credible, as he says, that the Nestorians, being in possession and objecting strongly to another mission starting beside them, fell so low as to descend to such odious methods to hinder him. At the same time, in fairness to the Nestorians, we must remember that it takes two to make a quarrel, and no doubt the contemptuous spirit which is seen even in Montecorvino's letter, had exhibited itself more plainly in his words and dealings with them, making friendship difficult and love impossible.

Yet surely in that great city of Peking, and in the greater Empire outside its walls, there was sufficient scope for two separate missions, especially under such a broadminded Emperor as Kublai Khan, who would no doubt gladly have helped them to arrange a division of the field.

The Nestorians failing in their attack on John, injured their own cause, and the Roman mission at once began to make steady progress. Two churches were built in the capital, and John of Montecorvino tells us that by the year 1305 A.D. he had baptized about six thousand people and translated the whole New Testament and the Psalter into Chinese.

He had also persuaded a certain king named George to leave the Nestorian Communion and enter the Roman, and this king built "a beautiful church on a scale of royal magnificence to the honour of our God, the Holy Trinity, and of the Lord Pope, calling it the Roman church''.

On the death of King George, his kingdom (about twenty days' journey from Peking) returned to the Nestorian fold, but

still on the whole the Roman mission was steadily making way; fresh recruits were sent from Italy, the work became widely extended; we read of a bishop of Fuhkien and another at Zaitun (Hangchow), while in 1308 A.D. John of Montecorvino was made bishop of Peking and Primate of the Far East by Pope Clement V.

This appointment, and the official position which went with it, must have carried great weight in the court at Peking, but apart from this the Nestorians had probably no man at all the equal of John in either ability, energy or spirituality, and his strong personality must have greatly increased the popularity of the Roman mission.

Nevertheless the Nestorians, with their long standing and far spread influence throughout the Empire, might have more than held their own but for an event which just at this time took place and which must have dealt a deadly blow at their work. In the year 1304 A.D. Mar Jabalaha, the Nestorian Patriarch in Persia, entered the Roman Catholic Communion and sent in his submission to Pope Benedict XI.

We have no definite record of what the consequences were in China, but they certainly could not have been less disastrous to Nestorian mission work in China than the submission of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Rome would be to the Anglican work in the East to-day.

Indeed one may safely say that the injury to the Nestorian work must have been greater than could possibly be inflicted by any such untoward event in the present more intelligent age, for at that time the learning was mainly confined to the clergy, and the ignorance of the masses gave to both Patriarch and Pope almost autocratic powers, so that there was little choice left but to follow their dictates.

The position of the Nestorian bishops and clergy in China must have been an exceedingly difficult one, unless they were willing to consent to accept the changed conditions in which they found themselves, and with a choice of submission or starvation before them, it is only human to suppose that numbers of them entered the Roman Communion, carrying their congregations with them.

One thing is certain, namely, that the Nestorian Christianity rapidly gave way before the Roman, and after the death of Primate John, which took place amid universal sorrow about the year 1330 A.D., we find the Emperor and some of the

ministers of the first rank appealing to the Pope to appoint another Roman Catholic bishop to the vacant see, while no mention is made of the existence of a Nestorian bishop, nor even of the mission which had evidently quite retired into the background.

Not so the Roman, for in the year 1353 A.D. the following description of that mission was given by a monk of Florence, John de' Marignolli:—"The Friars Minor of Cambaluc (Peking) have a cathedral church immediately adjoining the palace, with a proper residence for the Archbishop, and other churches in the city besides, and they have bells, too, and all the clergy have their subsistence from the Emperor's table in the most honourable manner."

To add to the discomfort of the Nestorians, Timur or Tamerlane was now carrying Mahommedanism, at the point of the sword, from Samarkand as a centre, right through Central Asia and even into Persia, and though at the beginning of the thirteenth century there are said to have been twenty-six metropolitans in Asia under the Nestorian Patriarch at Bagdad, the close of the century must have seen a very different state of things.

But the final blow had yet to come, a blow which not only put an end to the old Nestorian mission in China, but which even completely blotted out their young and vigorous Franciscan rival after a brief existence of less than two hundred years. In 1368 A.D. the friendly Tartar dynasty set up by Kublai Khan came to an end, and persecution became the order of the day. The last authentic fact known with regard to the Christian church in China at this period is the martyrdom of James of Florence, Roman Catholic bishop of Hangchow, in 1362 A.D. Probably numbers shared his fate, and the two missions were swallowed up in a common disaster.

It is not until the year 1552 A.D., some two hundred years later, that we again read of missionary work in China, and then it is 'a new face at the door', the intrepid Francis Xavier and the Jesuit mission.

In closing this sketch of the Nestorian mission in China I should like to point out one other cause to which the overthrow of the work may be traced—I mean the neglect of school work and the training of Chinese pastors and teachers. Nowhere have I been able to find any trace of Nestorian Christian

schools. Marco Polo speaks of churches, the Nestorian inscription tells of tonsured monks and orderly worship, and had there been a good school at the capital or elsewhere we may almost certainly say that it would have been mentioned.

But no effort seems to have been made to use and develop the Chinese Christians as teachers, speakers, doctors, or pastors, and in China any mission which neglects this branch of work is foredoomed to failure.

The hope of present-day missionary work, at least among the reformed Communion, lies chiefly in this, that the predominant note in their work is the teaching and training of the Chinese themselves, and the Christian schools and colleges, now occupying all the great strategic positions of the Empire, are at once both an inspiration and an assurance that there will yet arise a strong, cultured, indigenous branch of the Christian church in the land of Sinim.
